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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: ROK BY-ELECTIONS: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) In by-elections held on Wednesday April 25, Korean voters elected three National Assembly members, one from the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) and none from the ruling Uri Party. Still, as this election ended GNP's streak of dominating by-elections that started in summer 2004, the results are interpreted as a setback for the GNP. Two victories for minor opposition parties probably mean more negotiating clout for these parties with regional appeal as they contemplate alignment with Uri defectors to establish a new party. Despite the apparent GNP setback, the leading GNP presidential candidates, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye remain far ahead of all other candidates in recent polls.

THE WINNERS

¶2. (SBU) By-elections were held on April 25 throughout Korea for three National Assembly seats, six Heads of District Office and 47 local councilors. In Daejeon, the most watched race, Sim Dae-pyung captured 60.2 percent of the votes on the People's First Party (PFP) ticket while the GNP candidate, Lee Jae-sun, received only 37.1 percent. In the Muan-Shinan counties in South Jeolla province, former president Kim Dae-jung's son, Kim Hong-op beat out the independent candidate Lee Jae-hyun by a convincing 19.2 percent margin. The lone GNP winner was Koh Hee-sun who captured 57 percent of the votes in Hwasung, Gyeonggi province, beating the Uri candidate Park Bong-hyun who tallied only 30.9 percent of the votes.

¶3. (SBU) Kim's victory in Muan-Shinan was not a surprise as he rode his father's coattails to the win. Although many in the region were not overly enamored with the former president's son as a candidate, Kim Dae-jung continues to maintain a strong support base in the region. Kim's win helped boost the image of the Democratic Party (DP) at a critical time. Some members of the PFP and DP are likely to join forces with Uri defectors to form a new party to compete against the GNP in the presidential election.

THE LOSERS

14. (SBU) The GNP is clearly concerned about the results and some in the party may question its ability to win votes and maintain support ahead of the presidential elections. In the short-term, the GNP will experience some reorganization as a number of party officials have already announced their resignation in light of the poor showing in the election. Two members of the seven-member Supreme Council of the GNP offered their resignation, including Kang Chang-hee, responsible for the Daejeon race, and Chun Yu-ok, the only woman on the council.

15. (SBU) In a April 26 meeting with senior party officials, GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup said that he planned to reshuffle the leadership due to the election outcome. One unnamed GNP official was also quoted in the press as saying, "Kang will also not be able to avoid responsibility" indicating that more dramatic changes may be necessary.

WHY THE GNP LOST

16. (C) Many noted in Daejeon they were annoyed that Lee and Park would not campaign together for the GNP candidate. The two presidential candidates carefully staked out separate dates to make their trips to Daejeon, ensuring that there was no overlap in their schedules. Also, Kang Chang-hee, GNP's Daejeon chair told poloff that when he first chose Lee as the GNP candidate, Lee led in the polls over the PFP, Uri and DP candidates. Once the Uri and DP candidates left, their support went to Sim. Additionally, no one was impressed (even among the GNP) with Lee Jae-sun, but he was the only one who ran for the nomination.

17. (C) "Arrogance" was cited in both the media and private statements as another cause for the GNP's relative lack of success. Walter Paik, Senior Fellow at the Yeouido Institute, told poloff that the by-election served as a warning to the GNP. The voters sent a message that they will not support the GNP if they perceive their actions are arrogant or naive.

COMMENT

18. (C) While it is clear that the election results rocked the GNP boat, the long-term implications are likely to be mitigated between now and the presidential election still 8 months away. Sources in the GNP tell us that they will take this setback as a wakeup call that could invigorate their efforts. Although many pundits emphasize direct connection between these by-elections and the presidential election, it has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Only 27.7 percent of those eligible actually voted; the lowest by-election turnout in three years and well below the 65 percent turnout expected in December. It was clear that the voters did not see this election as anything but a local contest. The key takeaway from these by-elections is an old one: regionalism is still the main determinant of how South Koreans vote.

19. (C) Many speculate that the GNP won by-elections from 2004-2006 so convincingly by effectively getting out the I-hate-Roh vote. Now that Roh has left the Uri Party, the GNP must work to establish a better theme than "we're not the Uri Party" to garner support. While the by-election could point to endemic problems in the GNP such as corruption and being out of touch with common people, for now, the GNP, perhaps in spite of itself, has the two dominant presidential candidates.

STANTON